

# 5 A Second Level Pictorial Turn? The Emergence of Digital Ekphrasis from the Visuality of New Media

Nina Shiel<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The increasing visuality of our culture was observed in 1994 by Mitchell, who coined the term ‘pictorial turn’ to describe the interest in the visual taking place in culture and discourse (Mitchell, 1994). Since then, this process has increased further, particularly in all the areas of digital/new media. This chapter will consider this development from the perspective of literary studies. Its approach will be centred on the concept of ekphrasis, usually defined as a textual representation of a visual representation. This essay will expand from theories of ekphrasis towards a little researched area of visual/textual studies: computer-generated graphics and their representation. Briefly touching on examples from social media, interactive fiction (IF) and electronic literature, this chapter will proceed to consider the representation of the digital visual in print texts. Brief examples in terms of prose fiction will be taken from Stephenson’s (1992) *Snow Crash* and (2011) *REAMDE*. Finally, the essay will analyse Redmond’s (2008) poem *MUDe* as an example of digital ekphrasis that brings most of its features together. It will be argued that in a digital context, ekphrasis must move beyond the visual and, instead, represent the entire experience, thereby bringing the word and image closer together.

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**Keywords:** ekphrasis, visuality, virtual worlds.

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1. School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland; nina.shiel3@mail.dcu.ie

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1980s and early 1990s, visionaries such as William Gibson and Neal Stephenson imagined a global information network, to be experienced as a fully graphical, fully immersive artificial environment. While a network did develop during this time, what came out was not an immanent and immediate full-body virtual reality experience, but the internet: a stream of text and images framed by the computer screen, at a distance from the reader/viewer. Virtual reality, simulated sensory input by means of a headset and artificial limbs such as gloves, remained a trendy direction of research for a time until gradually fading out in the general lack of interest and suitable applications.

In its place, another sort of electronic immersion emerged as virtual worlds, graphical interactive environments intended for a multiplicity of users, formed on the screens. In these, users came to inhabit worlds other than their present reality through emotional and narrative immersion (Castronova, 2006). The dream of an intimate connection with the virtual by means of a phantom touch has given way to engagement of the visual sense, which has become the primary means of perceiving a virtual environment. The virtual is not to be touched; it can only be seen, or, secondarily, heard. Therefore, it would initially seem that a gap is destined to remain between the user and the environment, like that between a painting and its viewer.

The visuality of today's internet does not simply manifest in virtual worlds. The increased overall visuality acts as a status symbol. Since first becoming available to the general public at the beginning of the 1990s, the internet has rapidly grown from being a curiosity to becoming a household essential, comparable to the television or the telephone. This has enabled the growth of computer processors and the bandwidth required for transfer of data, which, for their part, have made possible the handling of more and more complex graphics. In the beginning, everything was based on simple ASCII text. Later, simple 9-bit graphics appeared. Later still, more complex graphics and digital photography became possible. Those of us who remember patiently accessing the internet through a dial-up modem will also recall the slow stage-by-stage

downloading of images in the second half of the 1990s, in striking contrast to today's high speed connections and near – or fully instantaneous appearance of image-heavy websites. In the area of games, a drive for more and more complex and believable (as opposed to 'realistic') graphics is continuing and is set to continue into the future. Thus, the digital image has come to signify progress, hi-tech, top of the line.

This trend is visible throughout today's information technology. From black and white, fully textual beginnings, software interfaces have embraced colours and pictures. On the web, news sites and online magazines employ large images, complex graphs and a steadily increasing amount of video. Social networking has transformed from the early textual blogging communities such as *LiveJournal* ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)) towards restricted textual updates such as those on *Twitter* ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)), with a maximum limit of 140 characters, and *Facebook* ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), where users tend towards short updates, photos and videos. Wholly image-focused social networks, such as *Tumblr* ([www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com)) and *Pinterest* ([www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)), are on the rise. This visuality of digital media is constantly available. No longer restricted to bulky desktops, which may have been only accessible at workplaces or at schools, the near-constant stream of images is enabled by mobile technology such as smartphones and tablets.

This essay will consider the visuality of the internet from the perspective of literary studies, specifically in terms of the relationship between word and image, which have been seen as separate from each other, and, consequently, opponents, for at least 250 years. If the apparent threat of domination of the image in the digital media presents a challenge to the position of the word, how is the word responding to this challenge? Below, I will discuss some of the forms the word, as a building block of literature, has taken to adapt to the new domain. This is not happening solely within the digital media itself, but also in the 'old', print media. Novels, short stories, and even poetry, are having – or choosing – to incorporate elements from digital media. These include representations of the visuality of digital graphics and the overall interactive experience of virtual worlds. In literary studies, verbal representations of the visual are often analysed

through the concept of ekphrasis. Once a rhetorical device in Antiquity, it later became adopted in a new guise for literary studies in the 1950s. Here, it will be applied to ask how word stands against the digital image. Having considered examples of digital ekphrasis both on- and offline, this essay will close by briefly analysing [Redmond's \(2008\)](#) poem *MUDe*.

## 2. The ambivalence of the image

The association of the digital image with progress and the subsequent apparent proclivity towards it over text is remarkable, considering that in studies of the relationship between word and image, the image has traditionally held the second place. It has been considered more primitive than the word, a feminised 'Other' to be feared and to be captivated by in the process of the gaze. Word and image have been regarded as fully separate from each other since the time of Lessing, who in his *Laocoon* of 1766 (translated into English in 1836: [Lessing, 2009/1836](#)) severed any pre-existing connections between the two by arguing that words are best suited for representing other words, images to represent images, and that on no account should the two be mixed. A visual depiction cannot duplicate speech, nor can a text imitate a picture. Therefore, [Lessing \(2009/1836\)](#) felt that any kind of attempts of one to represent the other would be pointless.

The duality of fascination/fear has had a key role in academic perceptions of the image. In 1994, shortly after the internet had become available to the general public, Mitchell coined the concept of a 'pictorial turn', a new interest in the visual in the public culture and in academic discourse ([Mitchell, 1994](#)). A large part of his argument was based on the mass media of the time, but he already brought into play information, or what he called 'cybernetic', technology. In his study, he notes that the latter has created new forms of visibility with significant power upon the spectator. [Mitchell \(1994\)](#) hints here at what has been further discussed by [Bolter \(1996, 2001\)](#): how the dominance of the visual in digital media also reaches out to inform the 'old' media, such as print newspapers, in their increasing reliance on the image.

One of the central concepts to Mitchell's (1994) 'pictorial turn' is the realisation that a picture presents "a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality", which, at the time, meant the discovery that *spectatorship* could be considered at least as complex an issue as *reading* (p. 16). He connects the pictorial turn to a number of European philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida and the Frankfurt School, noting that the fascination with the visual is mixed with unease, or outright fear, of the visual. Mitchell (1994) writes, "we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them" (p. 13).

The ideas of separation and mutual opposition of word and image evolved to take a key role in the concept of ekphrasis. Present in literary scholarship since the 1950s, it, too, has seen a considerable increase of interest in the past two decades. Ekphrasis refers to a verbal representation of a visual image, not simply by means of straightforward *description* but also by means of *evocation*, often using poetic language or extra details and/or appealing to the reader's own memories or other familiar associations. This lets the reader 'see' the intended visual in their own imagination. This concept began in Classical Antiquity as a rhetorical device, used in emotive delivery intended to evoke any kind of visual, from significant events to festivals, people, places and objects (Webb, 2009). The ideal was that the listener of the oratory would feel as though they were personally part of the scene evoked and experience emotions appropriate to the 'simulated' situation.

In modern literary studies, ekphrasis has become associated specifically with works of visual art and their representations in literary texts, particularly in poetry. It has also become intrinsically linked to the ambivalent status of the image in comparison with the word. In a seminal work on ekphrasis, Heffernan (1993) places the assumed opposition between word and image at the core of this concept, as the word struggles to represent the visual image. For him, this rivalry between the two is also inherently gendered. The act of spectating is active, while the object of the gaze is passive and still. Following old-fashioned gender

rules and the tradition of male poets to feminise the objects of art that acted as vessels for their emotions, in gendered ekphrasis the active male spectator subjects the passive, silent, female object of his gaze to his power and judgement. The passive visual only achieves any semblance of activity or voice through the interpretation of the text produced by the spectator, who has been inspired by the encounter. The object's message, or any interpretation, is under the writer's full control. This, of course, diminishes the supposed danger presented by the visual, which, despite its assumed passivity and silence, paradoxically possesses the dangerous power to enchant and captivate its spectator.

This potential danger of the visual is developed in another direction by [Mitchell \(1994\)](#) in his concept of the 'ekphrastic fear', which refers to the disquiet at the prospect of the merging of the visual and the textual. With this, [Mitchell \(1994\)](#) effectively prioritises human imagination over a straightforward visual depiction. If the verbal were able to fully reproduce the visual that it seeks to represent, there would be no function left for the verbal. It would be rendered obsolete, essentially non-existent. Likewise, no room would remain for imagination, as experiencing the visual in a text would no longer be a matter of a personal mental process of associations, familiarities and interpretations. In such circumstances, the visual would become invasive. To avoid this, the borders between the text and image must remain in place, and the two must treat each other as rivals and 'others'.

If the image presents such a threat, why is it so attractive? This question is addressed by [Krieger \(1992\)](#), who links ekphrasis with a semiotic desire to the general preference of the visual over the verbal. Manifesting as an 'ekphrastic impulse', this semiotic urge strives towards what [Krieger \(1992\)](#) calls a 'natural sign', a theoretical (and impossible) sign which is that which it represents. A word for 'apple' would be represented by an actual apple. An actual physical apple is understood far more quickly than the word 'apple' even by a native speaker. The verbal always, inevitably, mediates the visual. As with [Mitchell's \(1994\)](#) ekphrastic fear, if such a natural sign existed, representation would become meaningless. Histories, fiction and visual artistic representations would effectively cease to exist. Rather than presenting the ekphrastic opposition as a

struggle, Krieger (1992) sees it as a stillness in a text. To him, ekphrasis stills the flow of linguistic narrative into a moment of quiet, like the static, silent object of visual art at the heart of its inspiration.

Until now, ekphrasis has been mostly applied to static works of art such as statues and paintings. Most typically, such artworks are viewed in a gallery or a museum setting, which creates an additional formal layer to the viewer's encounter with the visual. Like the narrative in Krieger's (1992) suggestion, the viewer stops his or her own motion to view the artwork, always remaining detached from it. Although the artwork is tangible and physical, the viewer's experience is monosensory: only vision is used. Touch is forbidden, other senses are unnecessary.

Digital visual art, on the other hand, differs in a number of respects. Primarily, it is non-tangible to the user's physical body, but her/his graphical avatar may be able to interact with it in a variety of different ways. No longer simply a viewer, the *user* may be able to control the digital visual, not simply by gazing at it and offering it a guise and voice according to his/her own agenda, but in a concrete manner, by giving commands by means of a controller such as the mouse, keyboard, or a sensor that reads gestures. In many cases, this control 'creates' the artwork anew each time: for instance, when a cursor is guided on the screen of a digital poem to make the elements move, or when the user's avatar moves through a virtual landscape and progresses his/her own personal narrative by completing quests and advancing plot in an online game. If the immersion of the virtual environment is sufficiently strong, the avatar, as the user's proxy, enables the user to directly experience the emotions and reactions appropriate to the situation and setting. By interacting with the environment, the user enters into a dialogue that would be unreachable with a non-digital artwork.

The experience of a virtual environment is not simply visual. In a manner that might give pause to Lessing (2009/1836) and Krieger (1992), the user interface of a massively multiplayer online (MMO) game blurs textual commands, communication and input with strong visuals, and also with significant auditory

input, in the form of background music, sound effects, in-game dialogue and voice over internet communication with other players. This form of visual art is not still or silent: it shifts and changes and imbues the user with an illusion of movement or touch, as the avatar runs, fights or handles equipment, other avatars or even virtual 'food'. It forces the user to make decisions in terms of plot or engagement with other users. Not being sentient, a MMO or another virtual world will never be as active as its user, but neither does it sit back in its own passivity like a painting or a statue. By offering the user direct rather than indirect control and by enabling interactive dialogue and the (illusionary) freedom of (illusionary) movement, the participatory nature of the digital visual decreases the fear of the unreachable otherness of the image and makes it considerably more appealing.

### 3. Responses of the word

As discussed above, the word encounters and attempts to match the representational power of the image in the concept of ekphrasis. The first mention of ekphrasis in a digital context occurs in the first edition<sup>1</sup> of Bolter's (2001) work. He raised the possibility of a digital ekphrasis, but, following his observation that culture was becoming dominated by images, he saw a reversal the ekphrastic process in the new media and in its influence. Using examples from traditional and new media, he proposes that, rather than words striving to represent images, images are now used to represent words. Bolter's (2001) argument is supported by what might be termed 'legacy iconography'. Nowadays, a decreasing number of users know why the sign for 'save file' in the Windows operating system is a dark rectangle with a smaller white rectangle and a white dot inside it – a floppy disk. Original representation of the command in terms of appropriate technology approaches Krieger's (1992) desire for the natural sign very closely, but, by now, few users have ever even seen a floppy disk. The sign has transformed from its original signification to a representation of an idea, an action.

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1. Bolter (1991).

Much of digital text centres on hypertext, which refers to segments of interconnected texts linked to each other by means of hyperlinks. Although the concept of hypertext lies at the heart of all websites, the term itself is little used now. It was in wider use in the 1990s, as the first academic enquiries into digital texts, images and their interrelations took place. Using the definitions of [Krieger \(1992\)](#) and [Mitchell \(1994\)](#), [Tolva \(1996\)](#) has put forward that a hypertext cluster of linked fragments of text acts in an ekphrastic way. Rather than simply describing such a spatial textual structure, it evokes one through uses of text colours and the reader's experience, as the reader moves through segments of texts using hyperlinks, distinguished from the rest of the text by their colour.

In interactive fiction, a form of online literature made possible by hypertext, the reader progresses through the narrative by following links, which typically present two or more alternative paths. Starting out in the 1980s as adventure games, in the 1990s this form found some more literary applications. Joyce's *Afternoon*, written in 1987 and published in 1990, is considered to be the first example of the so-called 'hypertext fiction'. [Cooper's \(1994\)](#) *Delirium*, the first novel to be serialised on the internet, presented four different narrative pathways to the reader. *Delirium* was subsequently published in print in 1998, but reviews found it confusing. The popularity of interactive fiction faded towards the end of the 1990s, but recently, new manifestations of this literary form have emerged in the form of browser games such as the complex, mock-Victorian *Fallen London*<sup>1</sup>. It follows the principles of interactive fiction by telling a story, personal to the player, within the constraints of her/his choices. It employs very evocative intertextual language, which succeeds in creating a sense of personal involvement through the use of the second person address, details, allusions, references and similes. The game also steps out of its immediate borders by having some of the notable non-player characters post in-character messages to their own in-character social media accounts. This enables the players to communicate with the characters of the setting even outside the formal boundaries of the game itself.

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1. Originally known as *Echo Bazaar*, *Fallen London* (<http://fallenlondon.storynexus.com/>) is part of the Storynexus initiative, which allows users to create their own interactive textual worlds and narratives within them.

Such interactivity between a literary setting and its reader is also present in the 2010 real-time adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* on *Twitter*, when some of the characters actively solicited suggestions and answers to questions from the audience<sup>1</sup>. It could be argued that in the latter circumstance interactivity with the audience is illusionary, as everyone knows how the story must end, but this is equally applicable to most interactive literary material. The reader has a certain amount of freedom and choice, but the nature of the work as strictly or weakly narrative dictates how much influence the reader actually has<sup>2</sup>.

**Kashtan (2011)** argues that in interactive fiction, ekphrasis is the characteristic mode of visual representation, as online text seeks to (re-)create and evoke the experience of this typically ludic form of writing/reading, which allows the reader/user to select his/her own path through the text. He points out that the heavily textual interactive fiction manifests the cultural ambivalence with images, by reacting against, or distinguishing itself, from the far more popular graphical games. **Kashtan's (2011)** main proposal is that interactive fiction offers indirect visual experiences dependent on the player's imagination, rather than unmediated, explicit visual experiences as a painting or a graphical game would do. In this way, an IF text becomes an ekphrastic text, especially if we consider **Hollander's (1995)** suggestion of notional ekphrasis as a form of ekphrasis pertaining to a fictional artwork. Interactive fiction, like an ekphrastic text, does not only describe, but evokes, something visual. **Kashtan (2011)** supports this by referring back to the original ekphrasis as practiced in the Classical world as a practice of making the listener/reader 'translate' the intended powerful visual, from its representation in words, into an imaginary visual representation in the listener's mind's eye<sup>3</sup>.

Another feature of Classical ekphrasis – its interdependence between the

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1. The performance of *Romeo and Juliet* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/apr/12/shakespeare-twitter-such-tweet-sorrow>) was 'staged' by Mudlark and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

2. The opposite of a strictly narrative interactive story or a game is the form known in the world of game design as 'sandbox'. Rather than following through the various options of a pre-determined plot, it focuses on exploration, social interaction and construction of items and houses in-game.

3. **Kashtan's (2011)** source for Classical ekphrasis is **Koelb (2006)**. This work is heavily based on the groundbreaking article by **Webb (1999)**, which was expanded into a full length study in 2009.

deliverer of the ekphrasis and its receiver – is employed by Lindhé (2010), who sees this dialogue as an integral way to consider the interactivity of digital material. Ekphrasis fully comes into being when its receiver forms a vivid visual in her/his mind in response to a powerful verbal delivery, thereby requiring a two-way communication. In her exploration of electronic literature, she focuses on installations created using computer technology and intended to be ‘read’ by the same means. One of the best known examples of such works is *Screen*, created in the Brown University CAVE virtual environment<sup>1</sup>. CAVE works, when experienced directly, involve a headset to create immersion, with strong visual and auditory elements. The ‘reader’ is no longer an outsider, a passive observer, but becomes an essential part of the ‘text’ due to interactive elements. In this sense, such experiential forms of ‘electronic’ literature<sup>2</sup>, as well as full virtual worlds, link back to interactive fiction, which also places the reader at the centre of things by offering choices and a degree of control throughout the process of reading, thus offering a fuller sense of an experience. In her analysis, Lindhé (2010) focuses on the element of touch, interactivity and the near-bodily intimacy with the form of art that does not keep the viewer gazing at a distance in a power play, as traditional static art does, but invites the viewer into a close contact with, and within, it.

The intimacy between the digital and the reader/user can also emerge in less subtle ways. Much of digital literature addresses the reader directly, in the second person. This is particularly the case in any ludic material, whether an IF text or an MMO game, which casts the reader in a role within the setting. This device is not unknown from pre-digital print literature, but the influence of digital material has seen it increase in use, not only online but also in certain print texts<sup>3</sup>. Recent examples of this include the novels *Halting State* and *Rule 34* by Stross (2008, 2011), both of which deal with blurring boundaries of on-

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1. A video of *Screen* can be viewed on *YouTube*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOWF5KD5BV4&feature>. Brown University offers a module in CAVE writing, which enables non-programmers to create visual and verbal texts using this technology. In Ireland, the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology has a CAVE laboratory.

2. The Electronic Literature Organisation defines ‘electronic’ or ‘digital’ literature as “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer”. The website of the ELO, featuring this definition, can be found at <http://eliterature.org/>, see also Hayles (2008).

3. It has, for instance, been used by Calvino (1981) in his *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

and offline existence, and also the poem *MUDe* by Redmond (2008), analysed below. This device was also used by Jennifer Egan in her short story, *Black Box*, published in several self-contained instalments on Twitter in May 2012<sup>1</sup>. Unlike in the instances of social media used as appendices to game worlds or as a ‘stage’ for interactive theatrical performance, in the case of ‘Black Box’ no input was sought from the audience. Yet, the format of the second person narrative casts the reader as the main character of the story, seeking to ekphrastically invoke appropriate visuals and reactions in the reader, specifically from the reader’s point of view.

Aside from the second person address, which aims to engage the reader immediately as a central cast member of the work, by channeling through the reader the visuals and the entire participatory experience, print texts have adopted several other strategies to represent the digital image. Print literature has represented the digital visual since well before the latter’s general public availability, since the time of the emergence of the cyberpunk genre with Gibson’s (1984) *Neuromancer*. As actual technology has rapidly reached and often also surpassed, or bypassed, the technologies represented in literature, literature has responded in two ways. Some texts, such as Stephenson’s (2011) *REAMDE*, have chosen to work with currently available technology in their setting, without outwardly confining themselves to a particular year. Others, such as the works mentioned above by Stross (2008, 2011) and Brin’s (2012) *Existence*, have sought to remain ahead of the curve by imagining a move away from terminals towards sleek ‘augmented reality’, computer-generated text and visuals overlaid on actual reality, accessed by spectacles, contact lenses or implants.

Common to all verbal representations of the digital/virtual in prose texts is the dependence on some form of technology. The alternate world, in and out of which the characters pass, is not a mystical Otherworld, but a layer of existence artificially generated by technological means. The examples considered below are taken from the works of Stephenson (1992), whose *Snow Crash* holds a

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1. First published on *The New Yorker* Fiction account, [twitter.com/NYerFiction](https://twitter.com/NYerFiction), the story is also available on *The New Yorker* blog: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/05/jennifer-egan-black-box.html>.

seminal position in the area of text and the digital visual. He deals with the same themes in *The Diamond Age* (Stephenson, 1995) and in *REAMDE* (Stephenson, 2011).

In *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992), artificiality is enhanced by regular emphases in the text, either straightforwardly in verbs of technology or visuality such as ‘render’, ‘represent’ and ‘appear’ and in adjectives such as ‘imaginary’, ‘computer-generated’ and ‘not real’. At times, borders between the virtual and real are blurred, for example when the main characters Hiro and Y.T. phone each other. The question ‘Where are you?’ is with a return question, ‘In Reality or the Metaverse?’ (p. 191). When Hiro enters or exits the Metaverse, the novel’s virtual environment, we hear that ‘He turns off Reality’ (p. 388) or that it is ‘Time to get immersed in Reality’ (p. 285). In *REAMDE*, which sets part of its narrative in an online game called T’Rain, the protagonist Richard retorts a colleague’s lament about the difficulties of ‘physically’ moving in-game resources across the virtual landscape: ‘Not “physically” [...] You guys always make that mistake. It’s a game, remember?’ (Stephenson, 2011, p. 171).

The artificiality of the virtual landscape is linked with the awareness of the issues relating to the visual. The plot of *Snow Crash* is centred upon the eponymous virtual ‘drug’, an information virus, which appears as an image of a scroll of nonsensical text. Its viewing in the virtual environment does not only infect the user’s computer but also damages the user’s brain. Although Hiro’s point of view protests that ‘You can’t get high by looking at something’ (Stephenson, 1992, p. 39), the ekphrastic danger of gazing at a fascinating object appears to be underlined here. However, the graphic combines both image and text, which, together with the frequent mentions throughout the text that the visuals of the Metaverse have been ‘written’ into existence by means of programming code, indicates that the relationship between the word and image is not as straightforward as traditional ekphrasis would have it. The apparent dangers of the visual are also present in the much more recent *REAMDE*. As a consequence of a ‘palette drift’ in the graphics, the players of T’Rain end up battling each other as two opposing factions based on their colour schemes of

preference. This mocks the typical division into Good and Evil in the fantasy genre, on which the novel's game is modelled. Here, on the other hand, the concepts of 'good' and 'evil' lose all meaning as the users prefer to align themselves with colour schemes. The sheer absurdity of a division based on something as apparently trivial as colour palettes emphasises the power of the visual image.

In these texts, passages that may be termed as ekphrastic occur as intense, dynamic, evocative descriptions of the virtual environment<sup>1</sup>. These scenes are typically seen through a character's eye, with verbs of looking and seeing in frequent use. In addition to verbs of seeing, the passages also typically include several verbs of action and movement. The virtual scenes are themselves active within a constantly dynamic work of art, rather than still paintings or statues. This sense of movement in text reflects the same element present in digital texts. Similarly, works such as those constructed by the CAVE method and which involve wearable technology directly involve the movement of our own bodies in the creation of the digital experience. Installations of electronic literature typically rely on movement in their presentations of words and images. In interactive fiction, the reader proceeds through the segments of the narrative using the underlying hypertext.

#### **4. Representing digital text, representing imaginary visuals: John Redmond's MUDe**

An example of digital ekphrasis, as employed within the print domain, comes from the Irish poet John Redmond in his poem 'MUDe', published in a collection of the same title in 2008. The poem is written in the form of four sessions of online gameplay, interspersed with personal memories. In his explanatory notes attached to the poem, Redmond (2008) notes that the particular fictional MUD of the poem is a 'Dungeons and Dragons' themed fantasy online environment, entirely text-based. As Redmond (2008) observes, text-based online games are

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1. Some examples of these include, in *Snow Crash*, pp. 23-25, 33-39, 50-52, 405-408; and in *REAMDE*, pp. 591-594, 737-739 and 764-766.

a (dying) minority in the genre dominated by graphical games. However, many conventions of MUDs, such as certain idioms and terminology, division of characters into players and automated non-players, as well as many features of in-game communication by means of textual channels, have been preserved in the graphical games. This, combined with the intense visuals of the text, would make the representation of this textual online world indistinguishable from a graphical one, were the authorial intention not known.

Although technology tends to be emphasised in prose texts representing the virtual, it receives no outright mentions here. The artificiality of the scenes and events narrated is, instead, indicated by means of symbols and fonts denoting typed commands and out-of-character communication, as well as by the contrast of mundane matters such as employment and different time zones discussed on these channels. As some of the player characters are harassed by an orc tithe-collector and his fire spirit minion, one of the players, Oompah, logged on from her office, remarks: “*#Oompah: Because my boss just came in and me help him spell ‘insubordinate’*”. The player communication is denoted by the hash symbol and the italic font. While Oompah remains distracted by real world matters, another player, Godsend, displays newcomer behaviour by impolitely demanding instructions on how to play the game and ‘loudly’ (using all capital letters) ‘shouting’ abuse at other players. Immersion, so important in texts like *Snow Crash*, in which virtual characters are forbidden to try to touch each other for fear of breaking immersion, is of no concern to the players here. Ironically, the main character, the ‘you’ addressed by the poem, using the ludic second-person device, is fully immersed not only in the game but also in his own tragic memories triggered by the events and exchanges in the game. This ekphrastic appeal to emotional memories and associations, the merging of the boundaries between virtual and the real, familiar from the prose texts discussed above, also reflects the mutual two-way communication of the user and the game.

Throughout the poem, the main character is visited, seemingly in-game, by ‘your ten-year-old self’ and anxious relatives, with whom the player relives his childhood home and the trauma of his father’s suicide in the sea. The poem

contrasts the finality of a real-life death with the reversible nature of a death of a game character. The poem opens with ‘As you move, you turn living again’ and proceeds to chronicle the main character’s resurrection, another death in a battle against the fire spirit, another resurrection and another near-demise, saved by the temporary reboot of the server on which the game is hosted. These events are often associated with a sensation of falling, ekphrastically brought to life by descending irregular lines, consonance and assonance, and generous use of white space.

Right from the first line of the poem, a sense of movement runs throughout it. Aside from the scenes of falling and the cycle of death/resurrection, player and non-player characters constantly ‘arrive’, ‘leave’, move around and fight. In each area of the game, available directions for movement are presented: ‘Obvious directions: east, down’ (Redmond, 2008, p. 30). At times the desired movement is not possible: the command ‘>east’ is typed, but there is ‘No such exit’ (Redmond, 2008, p. 27). The ‘you’ of the main character wrestles, falls, throws things, climbs, fights, drinks, explores, swims. It is worth emphasising again that in the poem, these actions are assumed to take place on a computer screen. Not real, they are visualised by the player, from whose point of view the poem is written. As the poem passes on to the reader, the reader must, for her/his part, visualise the events anew.

Although the poem’s game is meant to consist purely of text, strong visuals are delivered as the main character’s memories merge with the game areas. These most recognisably ‘traditionally’ ekphrastic paragraphs, seeking to bring alive vivid visuals, appear as semi-prose, differentiated by even lines amidst the rest of the free-form poem. The descriptions are of significant sites: the main character’s childhood home, the nearby barn, pub and the sea, here resituated within the game and brought to life in a visceral manner. “When you walk, the surface twitches and your legs vanish below the knee”, “the entrance – a large rectangle of daylight – leans an ambivalent shoulder against the darkening banks of hay”, and “As the suddenly visible walls blister with self-understanding, a scorched ladder floats into the inferno” (Redmond, 2008, pp. 28-33). As visualisation, imagination and memories unite the act

of looking, present in the beginning of the poem at the start of a new ‘life’, is no longer enough. Fear, relief, annoyance, discomfort and amusement are all present. The poem shows that in a digital context, ekphrasis can no longer be said to apply to representations of the purely visual only: it becomes a verbal representation of the whole experience of the digital.

## 5. Conclusion

Examining the various responses of the word to the increased presence of the image in the current digital mass media offers an intriguing set of insights into the relationship between the two. Despite the long-held notion that word and image are separate, even rivals, the treatment of the word in the digital media and that of digital media in the realm of word indicate that their relationship in this context may be more amicable. Digital ekphrasis, which we may term a verbal representation of the digital/virtual *experience*, rather than simply that of a digital visual, offers a mutual dialogue between the immersive visual and the user. This creates a sense of a more balanced power dynamic and of a certain freedom. Although the user is not physically ‘there’ in the virtual environment, the use of vivid evocative language in the manner of Classical ekphrasis, the use of the second personal address, and the ability to experience not only vision, but also hearing, movement and strong emotions, create a strong simulation of personal participation, the very aim of ekphrasis in the ancient times. This is in contrast to many modern theories of ekphrasis, which perceive it as a process of detachment and outside observation, a one-way channel of antagonistic power struggle, and a moment of still reflection in the text. Even if, as the borders between the image and text blur, like they do in instances of the merging of the virtual and the real, we might feel a trace of [Mitchell’s \(1994\)](#) ekphrastic fear, perhaps we will also be sufficiently excited about the new possibilities afforded to embrace the little-considered core of ekphrasis: inspiration.

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